

# Michigan Legal Help Adds and Improves Tools

Posted by [State Court Administrative Office](#) on Aug 15, 2016 1:30:43 PM

*By Elizabeth Walz, Program & Outreach Coordinator, Michigan Legal Help*

Over the past year, this column has highlighted the growth of the Michigan Legal Help (MLH) program. On June 1, 2016, Tina Rosenberg of the *New York Times* wrote the column, “[Legal Aid with a Digital Twist](#),” which demonstrates the growing impact of online legal forms and the importance of projects like Michigan Legal Help (MLH).

Indeed, this work continues. The statewide network of MLH Self-Help Centers (SHC) is again expanding, with the opening of the MLH SHC of Alcona County on May 18. New content for the MLH website is in development for multiple areas of law, including:

- **Employment:** A wage and hour interview to help people determine if they do have a cause of action, to direct them to the most appropriate agency that can help them, and provide them with a letter or complaint form when one is available.
- **Education:** To complement toolkits containing legal information, an interview to produce letters requesting special education services and other hearings and reviews related to IEPs and discipline issues.
- **Family:** New toolkits and interviews for motions/responses regarding custody and parenting time and motions/complaints regarding revocation of affidavit of parentage, as well as modifications to the stepparent adoption interview so that it can be used by same-sex couples.

We will continue to provide updates on these changes as they are rolled out on the MLH website. However, in this piece, I’d like to address the depth and specificity of one essential aspect of our program: the court forms that are produced by the automated interviews we develop. Although MLHP works hard in many ways and at many levels to advance the goals laid out in the Solutions on Self-Help Task Force—“greater centralization, coordination and quality of support for the self-represented in Michigan”—the centerpiece of the program, [michiganlegalhelp.org](http://michiganlegalhelp.org), is designed to facilitate access to appropriate court forms *and* to foster users’ ability to complete them accurately and file them correctly.

To that end, we are constantly adding and improving the tools that help users locate, complete, and understand court forms. Let’s take a closer look!

First, we have made changes to the toolkit layout to make it easier for users to find the most important information. The forms were moved to the top of the page. This simple change has proved quite useful, especially during live help chat sessions, when people are often seeking the forms and/or interviews. Our navigators also appreciated this simple, but significant, improvement in usability. Additionally, the common questions and checklists were collapsed to make it easier for users to find information by reducing the need to scroll past many common questions to find the checklists.

In addition to quick access to forms, the toolkit page contains other valuable resources that assist users in completing the filing process after finishing the forms. Users must select their county in order to access the checklists. County-specific instructions will appear with step-by-step directions about service, filing, notarizing, and other procedural requirements. These instructions include a link to the new divorce process flow charts (available for both the plaintiff and the defendant) which also print upon completion of the interview.

To better serve low-income users, we also built the Waiver/Suspension of Fees and Costs form into the divorce and custody complaint interviews for those people receiving public benefits. Users who do not receive public benefits may still be eligible for a fee waiver but will need to use another interview to complete that form separately.

The documents that MLH interviews produce are not limited to SCAO-approved court forms, however. Many of our toolkits help users draft form letters and other materials that are necessary or useful in handling certain legal issues; for example, a letter to a landlord asking for repairs or a letter to a landlord requesting return of a security deposit. The new education toolkits will produce ten different letters to use in requesting special education evaluations, services, and other hearings.

Sometimes the letters produced are not meant to be submitted, but rather to aid a self-represented litigant in the active role he or she will need to perform in a court setting. Speaking in front of a judge can be nerve-racking for anyone, and even more so for people who have not had the benefit of legal counsel, those who may not speak English confidently, and those who have experienced trauma, abuse, or manipulation in the past. For these reasons and to promote the Supreme Court's shared goal of greater efficiency in the court system, we have added a script for the testimony in a final divorce hearing. Most information is filled in for the user, and we explain

he or she should fill in the blank spaces and make changes if necessary. We also suggest the user practice reading it ahead of time to be more comfortable when it is time to give their testimony. In addition, we let the user know the judge may also ask questions to make sure the testimony is complete.

We hope this more in-depth look at the forms and other types of materials that MLHP provides to its users helps you to understand how we conceive of the website's role in achieving access to justice for all citizens within the state of Michigan. As always, we welcome your comments and suggestions at <http://michiganlegalhelp.org/contact-us>.

Topics: **Summer 2016 Connections**